

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

We Come to Witness: Sonny Assu in Dialogue with Emily Carr



November 30, 2016, Vancouver, BC - Opening at the Vancouver Art Gallery on December 2, 2016, *We Come to Witness* is a dialogue between the art of modernist painter Emily Carr and contemporary artist Sonny Assu. In this exhibition, Assu creates a series of digital tags on Emily Carr's paintings selected from the Vancouver Art Gallery's collection, challenging the portrayal of Indigenous peoples as a vanishing race by interrupting Carr's landscapes with an insertion of ovoids and u-shapes. The exhibition also includes Assu's masks juxtaposed with Carr's paintings and a special ceramic collaboration with artist Brendan Tang. Altogether, the paintings, digital prints, sculptures and ceramic installations in *We Come to Witness* appropriate, transform and intervene to explore the effects of colonization, providing an alternative depiction of the Canadian landscape.

Sonny Assu's ongoing series *Interventions on the Imaginary* (2014-) confronts the colonial culture's portrayal of Indigenous peoples as a vanishing race. The series' title refers to art historian and educator Marcia Crosby's 2002 essay *The Construction of the Imaginary Indian*, in which she questions the "Indigenous identity" created by celebrated Canadian painters such as Emily Carr who naively link Indigenous identity to nature. Assu reaffirms Crosby's critique by marking Carr's iconic British Columbia landscapes with an Indigenous presence through the digital insertion of Kwakwaka'wakw formline elements.

Unlike the human activity present in her earlier works, the paintings Carr produced in the 1930s depict a solemn silence, including *Vanquished* (1930), in which leaning totems and mortuary poles stretch along the foreshore with a collapsing longhouse in the background. While Carr was actively trying to capture the conditions of life in the coastal regions as she saw it, her iconic paintings also perpetuated the myth of disappearing Indigenous peoples through these depictions of decaying totems and abandoned longhouses. This grouping of Carr's works was selected by Sonny Assu as a counterpoint to his own exploration of the story of the land from an Indigenous perspective.

About Sonny Assu.

Born in Richmond, British Columbia, Sonny Assu is Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nations. His practice spans painting, sculpture, photography and printmaking, merging Indigenous iconography and popular culture references with a wry sense of humour. Whether in the form of a digital tag or a sculptural intervention, Assu's perspectives are strongly informed by family history. He negotiates Western and Kwakwaka'wakw cultures as a way to explore his mixed ancestry and the realities of being an Indigenous person in Canada today. He graduated from Emily Carr University in 2002 and was the recipient of their distinguished alumni award in 2006. He is currently an MFA candidate at Concordia University.

About Emily Carr

Born in Victoria, British Columbia, Emily Carr (1871–1945) is one of the most significant Canadian artists of her generation. This West Coast modernist is widely recognized for her iconic paintings depicting the forested landscape of British Columbia and First Nations communities that she visited on her sketching trips in 1908, 1909, 1912 and 1928. Carr's first important body of work was executed in 1912 when, using the new sense of colour and paint handling she developed in France in 1911, she turned her attention to the totemic art of the First Nations of British Columbia. This work was not well received when it was first exhibited in 1913 and for many of the years that followed she rarely painted. In 1927, she was included in the *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* at the National Gallery of Canada, where her work was widely praised. Encouraged by fellow artists, notably Lawren Harris, Carr returned to painting and continued to paint actively until 1942, when ill health curtailed her practice. In later life, she devoted more time to writing; her first book *Klee Wick* won the Governor General's Award for Literature in 1941.

We Come to Witness: Sonny Assu in Dialogue with Emily Carr is the seventh in a series of In Dialogue with Emily Carr exhibitions organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and is curated by Diana Freundl, Associate Curator, Asian Art.

In Dialogue with Carr is an innovative series of exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery that focuses on the art of one of Canada's most significant historical artists, Emily Carr, and forges connections with other artists working in British Columbia today, in topics ranging from the changing forests to artistic process, personal histories to First Nations representation. Previously, exhibitions in the series include: *In Dialogue with Carr: Douglas Coupland, Evan Lee, Liz Magor, Marianne Nicolson* (2010-2011), *Emily Carr and the Theatre of Transcendence* (2012), *Allochthonous Window: Gareth Moore* (2013), *Emily Carr and Landon Mackenzie: Wood Chopper and the Monkey* (2014) and *Beyond the Trees: Wallpapers in Dialogue with Emily Carr* (2015).

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Images:

(left) Sonny Assu, *It was, like, a super long time ago that ppl were here, right?*, 2014, digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting (*Cumshewa*, 1912), Courtesy of the Artist

(right) Sonny Assu, *Spaced Invaders*, 2014, digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting (*Heina*, 1928), Courtesy of the Artist

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